

*Sensitive Soul: The Unseen Role of Emotion in Extraordinary States* by Michael A. Jawer. Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2020, 242 pages. \$16.99 softcover.

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The central thesis of Michael A. Jawer’s engaging and lively book, *Sensitive Soul: The Unseen Role of Emotion in Extraordinary States*, is that the many dimensions of human feeling and sensitivity can be understood in terms of an underlying continuum of emotional energy. The primacy of emotion is extended to the non-human domain as the author demonstrates through anecdotes and scientific research that interactions among organisms, and between organisms and the environments in which they dwell, are mediated by the flow of feelings. In bringing home his point, Jawer draws attention to exceptional individuals and extraordinary experiences — the experiences of savants, people with synesthesia and autism, prodigies, those who have suffered from PTSD, and those who appear to display remarkable psychic abilities. Jawer suggests that all such individuals possess “heightened physical and emotional sensitivities” (p. 2).

In his brief introduction, the author discloses one of his principal goals: bridging the gap between the inner world of subjective experience and the “outer world of time, space, and material things” (p. 3). Thus he rejects the Cartesian splitting of mind and body (subsequent chapters speak of “bodymind”). In his vision, science cannot continue to be narrowly focused on the “outer world,” with objective observation and precise measurement taken as the only acceptable means of operating. But neither can science simply be abandoned for a regression into sheer subjectivity. Instead, Jawer’s approach calls for “a sense of ‘skeptical enthusiasm,’ where novel ways of looking at things, unconventional ideas, and thoughtful provocation are all welcomed yet tempered by serious scrutiny” (p. 3). The introduction ends with a quote from Michael Shermer. Though a well-known skeptic, Shermer writes: “Revel in the mystery and drink in the unknown. It is where science and wonder meet” (p. 3).

The key concern of chapter 1 is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The classic example of this is the veteran returning from grueling combat and periodically

experiencing terrifying flashbacks. Of course, *any* traumatic encounter can entail such reactions. And this is not the *only* way of reacting to said trauma. Rather than vividly reliving the experience, some individuals may fall into a pattern of dissociation in which their world feels unreal to them or they feel distant from their own bodies. After identifying several varieties of PTSD and the individual differences they entail, Jawer offers an approach to understanding this disorder that takes into account the dynamics of brain and body. Moreover, for Jawer, the “brain is part of an entire ‘bodymind’... [T]he *interconnections* between brain and body, head and heart, psyche and soma ... make us who we are” (p. 9). It is in the context of scrutinizing PTSD that Jawer articulates what are arguably the two most important concepts of his book: *feelings* and *boundaries*.

In this review, I will use the terms “feeling” and “emotion” interchangeably as Jawer does, though many writers draw distinctions between them (e.g., Brun, Doguoglu, and Kuenzle, 2012). Given the pre-eminent position of feeling in Jawer’s thesis, its meaning might have been clarified at the outset. Instead, it is gradually elucidated as the work unfolds. In the chapter on PTSD, Jawer invokes a metaphor: “*feelings are like water*” (p. 10). They have movement or flow. “The flow, by definition, is energetic; the very word *emotion* connotes movement” (p. 10). As I noted above, Jawer views the flow of feeling as the primary medium for interactions within human and nonhuman spheres of life.

The other abiding theme of the book brought out in chapter 1 involves the role of the boundaries that exist between an individual and her environment — other people, animals, the natural world — and the boundaries within the person herself, especially that between conscious awareness and unconscious processes. Citing the work of psychiatrist Ernest Hartmann, Jawer distinguishes between people with “thick boundaries” and those whose boundaries are “thin”:

Thick-boundary people seem thick-skinned: not much gets to them. By contrast, thin-boundary people seem thin-skinned: lots of things get to them. Thick-boundary people are stolid; thin-boundary people are sensitive. Internally, thick-boundary people are less aware of what they’re feeling in general than thin-boundary people who are often supremely aware. Adjectives that tend to apply to thick-boundary people are *rigid, calm, deliberate, well organized ... and persevering*. Adjectives that tend to apply to thin-boundary people are *open, vulnerable, reactive, flexible... and agitated*. (p. 11)

Noting that a boundary’s thickness is a matter of degree and that a whole spectrum of thicknesses must be taken into account, Jawer relates the concept of boundaries to feeling:

I suggest that the flow of feeling is ... quicker and more direct in thin-boundary people and slower and less direct in thick-boundary people. Thus, individuals who are on the thin side of the spectrum will be quicker to realize what they’re feeling — and to express or react to it — than individuals on the thick side of the spectrum for whom feelings are often “out of sight, out of mind.” (pp. 11–12)

So the flow of feeling can be quickened or slowed, depending upon the thickness of one's boundaries. Applying this to PTSD, Jawer conjectures that "the majority of people who suffer from PTSD are thin-boundary" (p. 12). However, these individuals possess the *reactive* form of the disorder. Individuals with the less common, dissociative form actually appear to have relatively thick boundaries: rather than consciously reacting to the traumas they've suffered, they distance themselves from them, shutting them away in the unconscious.

Chapter 1 concludes by expanding upon another theme important for Jawer's whole project, an idea I touched on above. Mind and body are not divided from each other in human beings. Rather, human beings are *bodyminds*. Jawer sees the recognition of this as bringing a major change in outlook wherein the dualisms of the old medical model are surpassed. No longer are medical symptoms regarded as either purely physical or merely psychological. No longer do we see human development as determined either by nature or by nurture. No longer are the nervous system, immune system, and hormonal system viewed as entirely separate. According to Jawer,

[L]eaders in the fields of philosophy, psychiatry, and medicine are coming to this same view of things. They see that the old assumptions are painfully limited, increasingly ineffectual, and manifestly out of step with the accumulating evidence.... [L]eaders of the new medicine are pushing for a framework that properly accounts for the complexity of human beings, the salient differences in bodymind functioning between people, and a full appreciation that we are not separate from our environment. All of us are embedded in nature ... we are social creatures influenced by our fellows... and we are all sentient beings for whom feelings ... are paramount. (pp. 15–16)

*Sensitive Soul* is organized around the interrelated themes of feelings and boundaries, and this comes up time and again in the book. Chapter 2 is no exception. Spotlighted here is the phenomenon of synesthesia, the most familiar form of which involves a crossing of the senses, as when an individual experiences *tasting* a color or *smelling* a sound. But there are other forms of synesthesia wherein what are crossed are not the senses of the same person but sensations experienced by different people, as in mirror pain synesthesia where the synesthete sees another person in pain and feels that pain tangibly in an extraordinary display of empathy. Jawer maintains that the heightened sensitivity of the synesthete generally reflects the fact that the boundary that separates her from the flow of feeling is remarkably thin. Or putting it in the author's terms, "thin-boundary people have an energetic feeling flow that's aligned with greater empathy" (p. 41).

Jawer emphasizes that "people with mirror senses go far beyond our typical notion of empathy .... The experience is qualitatively different from merely identifying with someone or empathizing as a distinct individual. Their very boundaries get blurred" (p. 46). The possibility that a person's boundaries can become so thin that she might lose her distinctness as an individual leads to an important

question broached several pages later. What is the relationship between the thickness of one's boundaries and the functioning of the self? Though this question is fundamental, I don't believe the author does full justice to it. He approaches the matter indirectly and does not address it with the clarity it deserves. On the one hand, Jawer speaks of "blurred boundaries" (pp. 46–47), of "self–other confusion" (p. 53). This suggests that, in cases of radical empathy exemplified by mirror sensing, one's very sense of self can be lost. On the other hand, Jawer asserts that the thinning of boundaries can lead to the *expansion* of the self (p. 54). Then which is it? Are thin boundaries more likely to result in losing oneself, or to enlarging it? Can it go either way? If so, what does it depend on? Could it be that the sense of self can be enhanced if the thin boundaried person is *consciously aware* of the functioning of her boundaries? Would such awareness mitigate the "self–other confusion" that Jawer refers to? It seems to me that, for a coherent understanding of the relationship between boundaries and self, questions of this sort would have to be addressed — something that Jawer does not do.

Chapter 3 is relatively brief and begins with a focus on autism. Citing the memoirs of Donna Williams, who suffered from this disorder, Jawer says that "people on the autism spectrum view themselves and the world primarily through a web of sensory impressions, not mental constructs . . . . [They] are apt to experience things first and foremost as sensory phenomena, being drawn by . . . literal impressions" (p. 59). So, whereas I would see my microwave oven as a device for warming food, someone on the autism spectrum might be more attuned to its rectangular shape, its shiny surface, and its smoothness to the touch. Jawer further asserts that "people with autism will often merge into the web of sensation they are witnessing. They 'resonate' with whatever is being experienced, losing their sense of body boundaries so that they seem to become one with the object" (p. 60). The phenomenon of autism therefore provides another example of people with exceedingly thin boundaries. And it is not only sensory stimuli that readily cross these porous boundaries but emotional stimuli as well, so that autistic individuals can experience "an intense, uncontrollable empathy" (p. 61).

My interest was sparked by another issue raised in chapter 3. Jawer claims that "people with thin boundaries are more likely than others to have anomalous experiences" (p. 65). Later he claims that "highly sensitive and thin-boundary people can legitimately apprehend stimuli in the external environment unnoticed by the rest of us" (p. 71). These "environmental and emotional sensitivities . . . are the crucible from which anomalous perception can genuinely result" (p. 71). But just what does Jawer mean by an "anomalous" experience?

The term in question is somewhat ambiguous. In the general psychology literature, anomalous experiences are unusual psychological phenomena such as strange perceptual distortions or hallucinations. But the term has also been adopted in the field of parapsychology, which studies the possible existence of phenomena that go beyond merely psychological effects — phenomena such as

ESP or psychokinesis. How is Jawer using the term? Though he never spells out exactly what he means by this term, he appears to be using it in both senses — both psychological and parapsychological. In fact, he gives examples indicating that the line separating these phenomena can be very thin. In some of the cases he recounts, it is indeed difficult to say whether a thin-boundaried sensitive is picking up on remarkably subtle sensory cues or on cues that exceed the range of sensory perception. The issue of anomalous perception is taken up later in the book and I will return to it.

In chapter 4, the topics of synesthesia and autism are reprised and two new phenomena are added to the mix: savantism and prodigiousness. With the former, the individual possesses “an extraordinary mental ability that coexists with significant mental and social deficits” (p. 76) whereas, with the latter, uncanny talents are not coupled with such deficits. Common to all of these conditions is a heightened reaction to environmental and emotional stimuli. This hypersensitivity may be related to a hyperconnectivity of the brain: “Rather than one [brain] cell having connections to ten other cells, it might be linked to twenty” (p. 61). In addition to sensory overload coming from the environment, the sensitivity may entail an overload involving the amygdala, a region of the brain associated with emotion. Beside these influences, genetic factors may be operative in causing hypersensitivity, as well as influences from the immune system at work in the mother’s womb. If the mother gets an infection, for example, the immune system will be activated and this can lead to a hyperconnectivity of cells, which, in turn, can result in hypersensitivity. Jawer discusses research indicating that fear-evoking environmental stimuli can heighten sensitivity to the extent that the genes are affected, the effect becoming transmissible to the next generation (see pp. 95–96). The author argues that all the conditions considered in chapter 4 reflect a thin-boundaried hypersensitivity, and he comes to the conclusion that “challenges to normal development in the womb may be the most certain precursor” (p. 108) of these conditions.

To the forms of extraordinary sensitivity examined in chapter 4, Jawer adds one that is even more extraordinary. “[T]he special individuals being explored here — synesthetes, people with an autism spectrum disorder . . . savants, and child prodigies — often have something else in common besides environmental sensitivity. That something else is psychic sensitivity” (p. 104). Presumably, this is the case where the thin boundaries associated with sensory sensitivity become so thin that a threshold is crossed into the extra-sensory. The author proceeds to consider the question of whether there might be a psychic element to autism (p. 105) and he explores what it might mean when children report memories of other lives (pp. 108–112). Chapter 4 finishes with speculation on the possibility that human beings arise as “seeds” from a broader, hidden reality that is the source of life itself (pp. 112–115). Jawer proposes that this process of “germination” has been short-circuited in some way for exceptionally sensitive individuals, so that they remain more attuned to the original reality than the rest of us.

Chapter 5 centers on feelings in non-human animals, and it begins by discussing various lines of evidence demonstrating that animals do indeed feel. Many interesting anecdotes are offered showing the animal's capacity for empathy and sympathy, for social bonding and connectedness within and between species. Jawer speaks here of the "empathosphere," seen as a "universal realm of feeling" (p. 125) in which non-human animals participate more readily than human beings. But the author intimates that human beings do partake in the "empathosphere" and when deep feelings are aroused in this realm — feelings that often involve people who share loving bonds, psychic experiences are sometimes reported. He goes on to suggest that the sense of loving connectedness "underpinned by emotion" is "the core of spirituality. At its root, spirituality really is a matter of 'fellow feeling'" (p. 129). Jawer brings out that it is not only human beings who are capable of spiritual experience but non-human animals as well (pp. 127–129). Furthermore, he proposes that, as with human beings, the emotional sense of connectedness non-human animals are capable of extends beyond other individuals to the natural environment as a whole — a sense of unity with nature (p. 131). Central to this is the feeling base that prevails in the empathosphere. And there is the concept of the *soul*, for it is the soulful part of us that experiences these connections, as primatologist Jane Goodall thought might be true for her chimpanzees (p. 131).

The main concern of chapter 6 is how trauma and death can trigger extraordinary perceptions. Human and non-human animals alike become highly sensitized when faced with existential threats to themselves or to those with whom they are emotionally linked. Some of these emotion-laden sensitivities appear to verge on the extra-sensory.

Jawer starts his account in this chapter by conveying anecdotes of how animals like elephants, dolphins, and whales recognize death, seem to have an uncanny awareness that death is imminent, to grieve the loss of those in their families or groups, and even to guide human beings to safety when their lives are endangered. Cats and dogs are also shown to have a remarkable sensitivity to trauma and death and instances are described that challenge our understanding of how communication occurs. Although similar examples are given for human beings, Jawer nonetheless hypothesizes that extraordinary sensitivity of this kind is greater in animals. He wonders whether "such abilities stem from these animals' living 'closer to the bone.' In other words, [whether] they apprehend feelings more directly and feel them more intensely than human beings do because, unlike us, they don't traffic in rumination and analysis" (p. 147).

In general, cases highlighted in chapter 6 include those where individuals facing severe injury, disease, or death — episodes engendering strong fear — may obtain advance information about this through unconscious sources (e.g., dreams), or the information may arise spontaneously as anomalous perceptions in others with whom they have strong emotional bonds. The author closes the

chapter by proposing that the more somatically and emotionally intense the experience, “the more likely it is to be transmitted to oneself and to others” (p. 155). If a true physical emergency is involved, the embodied information may be transmitted in a way that “may subvert the normal bounds of time and space” (p. 155).

In chapter 7, the author elaborates on research first mentioned in chapter 4. Young children appear to remember spontaneously the lives and/or deaths of people from the past about whom they had been given no information. In painstaking studies carried out by psychiatrist Ian Stevenson, verification was sought — and in many cases obtained — that the people who were recalled actually did exist. Also often confirmed were details about the lives of these individuals that the child could not have known by conventional means. Moreover, in a number of cases, the child recalling the previous life had birthmarks or other malformations that closely corresponded to injuries sustained by the persons they remembered. Jawer points out that some children having these memories suffered from phobias related to the traumatic experiences of the remembered person, such as fear of water, when the recalled person died by drowning.

Jawer does caution that the reincarnation interpretation might not necessarily be warranted, since this assumes that “an entire personality has somehow been incorporated into a new body” (p. 160). In fact, it might be the case that only impressions or images of the traumatic events might “somehow become attached to infants *in utero*” (p. 160). The author goes on to offer anecdotes of heart transplant recipients reporting memories consistent with the life experiences of the donors (pp. 160–64). To Jawer this suggests that the reincarnation interpretation “as it’s typically thought of — in other words, someone reborn in an entirely new individual — is off base, or at least incomplete” (p. 164).

Jawer sets forth an alternative hypothesis drawn out over several pages. The account struck me as somewhat choppy and indirect, if not a bit rambling. The essence of the hypothesis is that the dying person, facing a life-threatening situation, has a great deal of pent up biophysical and emotional energy, and that “the person having memories or dreams associated with the deceased. . . is of a thin-boundary constitution” thus is “more open to new possibilities, new feelings, and new experiences — and more conversant with emotion in general” (pp. 165–166). Therefore, given the accumulation of emotional energy in a person facing his or her demise, and given the fact that there seems to be no outlet for that energy to be discharged, it might be transmitted at the time of death to a sensitive, thin-boundary person. Do I buy the argument? Well, to the extent that we assume an emotional continuum between the dying person and the thin-boundaried recipient, it might have a measure of plausibility. Nevertheless, it does leave many puzzling questions about the mechanism by which this transfer of energy would take place and register in the recipient in the form of specific memories and physical correlates (such as birthmarks and the like).

Chapter 7 concludes by expressing the all-encompassing, primal nature of feelings. The “empathosphere” entails a fundamental energy “so thoroughly pervasive that it transcends both space and time” (p. 179). “It should be clear by now,” says Jawer, “that feeling is ground zero for all our sensibilities, all our perceptions, memories, dreams, and insights” (pp. 179–180). Because “the stuff of feelings is... preconscious... the forces at work are difficult if not impossible to discern” (p. 180). And yet:

Two propositions seem like a fair bet.... The first is that feelings can endure and be conveyed beyond anything we can conventionally explain. The second is that human beings — and other sentient creatures as well — are connected by emotion in a more than human, more than temporal, and more than strictly physical world. (p. 180)

*Sensitive Soul* advocates a boldly speculative approach that nonetheless is grounded by the considerations of science and reason. The book ends as it began, by urging “a spirit of enterprise and exploration” (p. 182). We are asked to put aside “the preconception that something or other is impossible” and refrain from “arbitrarily limiting our concept of what life is about, what emotions are for, and how we may be connected” (p. 183).

This reader-friendly book is fluent and lively, informal and informative. The author presents us with a fascinating smorgasbord of extraordinary experiences. He gives many well chosen and easy-to-grasp examples of the phenomena he is dealing with. His interesting anecdotes are frequently backed up by scientific research, though the latter is often not described in fine detail but referenced in the endnotes. I had the impression that not all anecdotes of anomalous perception were firmly supported by research and that some of them might lend themselves to more conventional explanations than those implicit in Jawer’s account. Generally speaking however, Jawer does a good job of explaining research to a general audience and making it palatable.

There were times when I found the writing a bit fast and loose, and not always as clear as it could be. Perhaps the most important term in the book is *emotion* but the meaning he ascribes to this word is brought into focus only gradually and the pivotal concept of *emotional energy* remains somewhat fuzzy. Another pair of terms that could have been better elucidated are *spirit* and *soul*. Jawer appears to use the terms interchangeably without attempting to unpack their meanings. I felt the need for greater clarity here, while realizing that concepts as subtle as these are notoriously elusive. I had a similar reaction to the terms *mind* and *psyche*. The author also took quite a while to clarify the claim that “human beings are fundamentally electrical creatures” (p. 29), and when clarification came, it was only by implication.

Jawer’s speculative discourse seemed especially loose around his use of the terms *space* and *time*. For example, he speaks of the intensity of a person’s feelings being “captured in a fusion of space and time” (p. 112); of energies aroused



in life-threatening emergencies “upend[ing] the normal convergence of space/time so that anomalous perceptions result” (p. 151); of emotional distress “subvert[ing] the normal bounds of time and space” (p. 155); and of an underlying realm of feeling that “transcends both space and time” (p. 179). Perhaps because I am sympathetic to the notion that space and time can indeed be transformed under extraordinary circumstances, and because I have done considerable thinking of my own on the subject (e.g., Rosen, 2008, 2017), I was sensitive to the absence of any explanation whatsoever in Jawer’s account. Since the author refers to the transformation of space and time in a number of places, might he not have devoted a few words to giving the reader some idea of what it means to challenge the ordinary constraints of space and time?

I also felt that, at times, the author tended to stretch things, to indulge in offering interpretations that, while not being totally out of the question, were too thinly supported. For instance, in discussing the phenomena of hauntings and ghosts, Jawer sets up an equivalence between the behavior of a traumatized person compulsively reenacting the traumatic event and the reported behavior of ghosts, who also seem to be reenacting something traumatic: they “are doing exactly the same thing” (p. 174). He notes moreover that, just as people, when severely stressed, may go pale and cold, “ghosts down the centuries not only appear as white but supposedly cause a chill when they appear” (p. 174). Another example of speculation that is too loose for my liking concerns cases mentioned above where infants are reported to have birthmarks or physical deformities that match the circumstances of dying persons whose lives they recall. Jawer proposes that these cases may reflect the strength of will to survive and accompanying emotional intensity of the dying person. No doubt Jawer would openly admit that he is speculating here, but, to me, the speculation does not seem well grounded.

Despite the misgivings I have stated, my overall impression of this book is favorable. The cases described are fascinating and I applaud Jawer’s challenge to the mainstream medical model and his advocacy of a non-dualistic approach to psychology, science, and philosophy. But he does paint with a broad brush. In part, this may reflect his intention of reaching a large-market popular audience. *Sensitive Soul* is, after all, a trade book, so perhaps the implicit constraints of the business model may have placed the emphasis on engaging anecdotes, with the development of key conceptual issues kept to a minimum. Still and all, I found this book of value and I enjoyed reading it.

## References

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